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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN, CA/FPP

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SUBJECT: RAID NETS MAJOR ALIEN SMUGGLING RING IN HONDURAS

1. SUMMARY - Honduran police, military and prosecutors with DHS assistance, conducted a raid in the northwestern city of La Entrada de Copan, capturing the leaders of a major alien smuggling ring. The ring had been operating with the alleged collusion of GOH civilian employees of the passport office and the National Registry of Persons, as well as two former employees of the Mexican Consulate in San Pedro Sula. The Government of Mexico is cooperating with the GOH to investigate the former Consulate employees, both of whom have been recalled to Mexico.

2. On Thursday, August 7, 2003, three leaders of an alien smuggling ring were captured in a raid conducted by Honduran police, prosecutors, and military personnel, with the assistance of the DHS Unit of Embassy Tegucigalpa. The raid took place in the northwestern town of La Entrada de Copan, Honduras, near the Honduras/Guatemala border. The three arrestees were part of a band called "The Chameleon". They are Honduran businessman Walter Leonel Guevara Velasquez, his brother engineer Roque Ramon Guevara Velasquez, and attorney Edgar Danilo Chinchilla. An arrest warrant was issued for Dolores Alvarado Flores, an employee of the National Registry of Persons Office in the neighboring city of Santa Rosa de Copan. She allegedly escaped to El Salvador.

3. Two residences and a law office were searched during the raid. A large number of stamps and seals, as well as forged letterhead stationery from local banks, clinics, government offices, airlines, commercial businesses, notarized certificates and titles to real estate and personal property were found. More than 40 Honduran passports were also found. Some of the passports had been issued, but did not contain seals, indicating that the traffickers had access to blank passports. On the properties police also found over eleven thousand dollars in cash. The traffickers' affluent life styles were clear from the pictures printed in local press. An Olympic sized swimming pool, surrounded by hand-painted murals dominated one of the residences. The houses were large and opulently furnished, and several luxury vehicles were confiscated.

4. The smuggling scheme allegedly involved charging seven thousand dollars for a package of false documents including passports, birth certificates, job letters, and all the documentation necessary to get a visa at the Mexican Consulate in San Pedro Sula. All documents were notarized and contained realistic seals. Mexican consular employees allegedly working with the ring would issue visas to the buyers. Once in Mexico, the buyers would be directed to a "coyote" to take them across the border into the U.S.

5. Strong evidence was found linking Doris Alvarado Flores, the Registrar of Persons in Santa Rosa de Copan to the ring. She allegedly issued the false birth certificates, identification cards and other official documents. The two former Mexican consular employees, Roberto Ruelas Angel and Susann Avila Castelazo issued the visas at the Mexican Consulate in San Pedro Sula. Ruelas and Castelazo had worked at the Mexican Consulate in San Pedro Sula since 2000. According to the Mexican Embassy in Tegucigalpa, both have been recalled to Mexico and are awaiting the outcome of an ongoing visa fraud investigation.

6. COMMENT - According to the prosecutor, the smuggling operation had been ongoing since 2000, and is reported to have been able to smuggle ninety to one hundred persons per month into the U.S. From material found at the scene, it is evident that the ring had contacts in the local Registry of Person's Office as well as the Passport Office. It will be interesting to see how the case is handled since the Attorney General Against Organized Crime is new in the office. This is her first major case and it potentially involves wealthy and connected people. We will monitor the progress of the case through the court system and keep Department posted on the outcome.

PIERCE